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Is marketing junk food to kids a trigger for childhood obesity in the UK?

Term Paper

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1. Introduction

It is not a mystery that us humans want what is not necessarily good for us. The fundamental desire, want and even need for foods high in fat, salt and sugar is embedded deep within us. It is part of our evolutionary biology, that we crave these unhealthy substances, due to their original scarcity, and our physical need for them in order to survive.¹ However, time has moved on and with it technology and the availability of these substances.² It has become so easy for us to just drive to our nearest supermarket and be spoilt for choice in terms of variety and quantity of food products, at least in the developed world, such as the UK. Previously we had to hunt and go without a sufficient amount of calories for days. One could say, our circumstances have changed, but our mind-sets have not. And it is precisely this, which advertisers are taking advantage of. They carefully craft messages to turn perceived needs into wants for their unhealthy products ultimately for their financial gain.³ Children especially, are targets due to their tendency to act on their instincts.⁴ Ultimately, this paper explores whether a link exists between extensive junk food marketing and the growing obesity rate in children living in the UK.

2. Facts and Figures for obesity in children:

2.1 The condition

First of all, it is important to understand what exactly British society is currently dealing with, concerning childhood obesity and the extent of the disease. When people talk about obesity in the UK, they often speak of an epidemic. An epidemic is defined as an illness, “affecting or tending to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population, community, or region at the same time” (Merriam Webster). This describes the extent of what the UK is dealing with. Especially the prevalence among children, here defined as being between the ages 2-15 years old⁵, has increased significantly. Secondly, it must be identified what exactly the condition obesity means in the case of children. A child is classified as obese when the BMI, the Body Mass Index, is a number higher than 30. The symptoms and risks that sometimes already occur in obese children and almost certainly in later life are type II

¹ Joan C Han, Debbie A Lawlor, and Sue YS Kimm, “Childhood obesity,”

³ Theodore Levitt, “Marketing Myopia,” (1960).

⁴ Ike-Elechi Ogba and Rebecca Johnson, “How packaging affects the product preferences of children and the buyer behaviour of their parents in the food industry,” *Young Consumers* 11, no. 1 (2010).

⁵ Georgina Cairns et al., “Systematic reviews of the evidence on the nature, extent and effects of food marketing to children. A retrospective summary,” *Appetite* 62 (2013).

diabetes, high cholesterol and blood pressure, asthma, cardio-vascular disease, cancers and the list goes on.⁶ These various health conditions are classified as NCDs.⁷ This stand for Non Communicable Diseases, which means that they are chronic diseases and are not passed from person to person. They generally tend to be of long duration and slow progression.⁸ One of the only ways they can be improved or reversed is a change in lifestyle. This means pursuing a healthy diet and increasing physical activity.⁹ Furthermore obesity is the fifth highest risk for death worldwide, especially for premature deaths of children.¹⁰

2.2: Numbers

After having examined how exactly the condition obesity is and what it involves, it is necessary to provide some statistics to give a clearer picture on the extent of the problem affecting children in the United Kingdom. Within the definition of “children” being between the ages of 2-15 years old, children can be split into two age groups. In 2014/15 around 16% of children in primary school ages (2-10 years) were obese.¹¹ Later on, in secondary school (10-15 years) a staggering one out of five children were obese in England.¹² This shows that the risk of obesity only increases with age. On top of this, research has shown that 80% of children are not getting their recommended 5-a-day.¹³ Furthermore, it should be noted that there is a strong correlation with obesity and more deprived areas in the UK, with number of obese children being more than double.¹⁴ In addition, it should be mentioned that over 80% of these obese children will become obese adults in later life. (RTE) As mentioned above, obesity is closely linked with life threatening NCDs. Non Communicable Diseases alone, are the cause of over 35 million deaths worldwide each year.¹⁵ According to some of these figures, it is understandable that childhood obesity is a concern to British Society and that they are looking for someone or something to blame. Something that comes to mind, is the heavy advertising of junk food to children by the industry. In the following part of the paper, the different stakeholders in this issue will be introduced with their different views.

⁶ Joan C Han, Debbie A Lawlor, and Sue YS Kimm, “Childhood obesity,”

⁷ “WHO 2010,”

⁸ WHO, “Factsheet NCDs 2015,”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “WHO 2010,”

¹¹ “statistic_id375726_children_-overweight-and-obesity-prevalence-in-england-2014-by-gender-and-age,”

¹³ Betty McBride, Charlie Powell, and Kawther Hashem, “the-21st-century-gingerbread-house,” *British Heart Foundation* (2011).

¹⁴ Department of Health, “Government Response to the House of Commons Health Select Committee report on Childhood obesity – brave and bold action, First Report of Session 2015-16,” (2016).

¹⁵ “WHO 2010,”

3. Presentation of the stakeholders and their views:

Public Health England/NHS/WHO: The health sector finds itself overwhelmed by the increasing number of patients with obesity-related diseases taking up hospital beds and costing the country millions in health care costs.¹⁶ As the patients are getting younger, they feel that healthy eating and children's diets are principal items on the public health agenda today.¹⁷ They look to the government to take the issue more seriously by forming recommendations to put tighter regulations on junk food marketing.¹⁸

The food industry/lobbyists: The food industry of course has another agenda, mainly involving their own, or their investors' financial interests. They are of the opinion that obesity is everyone's personal responsibility and that it is down to parents to control their children's diets. Moreover, they should limit their sedentary lifestyles.¹⁹ In their eyes there are many different reasons for increased childhood obesity in recent years apart from junk-food marketing targeted at kids. Just to name a few factors: It has been proven that a high birthweight and parental influence, such as a lack of breastfeeding, can lead to obesity. In general, poor health and deficiencies increase the risk. Furthermore, British children's lower energy expenditure partnered with too much sedentary time in front of the TV has just become part of society today, especially in urban areas.²⁰ The lobbyists applaud the current self-regulation. This means that advertising is controlled by regulatory bodies created by the advertising industry itself, for instance the ASA (Advertising Standards Authority) and CAP (Committee of Advertising Practise).²¹ The ASA regulates the content of UK advertisements, sales promotions and direct marketing, and ensures the industry adheres to the advertising codes. While, the CAP oversees the UK's advertising codes.²² However due to the dependency of these regulatory bodies on the advertising industry for funding and members, potential conflicts of interest arise. They do not have the interests of the British children at heart, but those of the investors from the advertising industry: high sales and profits.²³ The

¹⁶ Department of Health, "Government Response to the House of Commons Health Select Committee report on Childhood obesity – brave and bold action, First Report of Session 2015-16," (2016).

¹⁷ Betty McBride, Charlie Powell, and Kawther Hashem, "the-21st-century-gingerbread-house," *British Heart Foundation* (2011).

¹⁸ "WHO 2010,"

¹⁹ Chris Preston, "Parental influence upon children's diet: The issue of category," *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 34, no. 2 (2010).

²⁰ Joan C Han, Debbie A Lawlor, and Sue YS Kimm, "Childhood obesity,"

²¹ Betty McBride, Charlie Powell, and Kawther Hashem, "the-21st-century-gingerbread-house," *British Heart Foundation* (2011).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

food industry sees the option of voluntary pledges as sufficient, but also as giving them a competitive disadvantage. This means “developing their own policies on marketing to children or signing up collectively to national, regional or global pledges”.²⁴

The youth of today and their parents: When debating this issue one must not forget that the children talk about today equal the British population of tomorrow. The success of the country lies on their shoulders: to have to produce offspring, to work and pay tax. They will not be able to do this without their health or dying prematurely. The danger is that these children are at risk of dying younger than their parents.²⁵ An author once said: “When you have your health, you have everything. When you do not have your health, nothing else matters at all.” (Augusten Burroughs, Dry). Parents feel that it has become impossible for them to fully intercede and limit their child’s exposure to the tactics of the food industry.²⁶ They are fed up with the food industry meddling in the upbringing of their children with marketing and telling them what to eat. The interference causes family stress, because “...mothers are known for instructing children not to play with their food and marketers are encouraging them to.”²⁷ The modern child wanting that bag of sweets, “attempts to excerpt influence over parental purchase in a repetitive way.”²⁸ This is also known as “Pester-Power”.

4. The Link between Marketing and Overeating:

4.1. Channels of Food-Marketing

Before analysing whether a link exists between junk-food marketing and childhood obesity, it makes sense to first define what exactly is meant by “marketing” in this context and what channels and foods are being discussed. The channels specifically addressed in this paper are Television, Internet Media, and Packaging at the Point of Sale. Marketing is broadly defined as “the process of creating value for customers and build strong customer relationships in order to capture value from customers in return.”²⁹ In this case, the customer corresponds to children and the industry is targeting their marketing efforts at them in order to gain financially. The foods being talked about equate to so called “junk-food”. This means: sugary

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ S. Linn and C. L. Novosat, “Calories for Sale: Food Marketing to Children in the Twenty-First Century,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 615, no. 1 (2008).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ike-Elechi Ogbu and Rebecca Johnson, “How packaging affects the product preferences of children and the buyer behaviour of their parents in the food industry,” *Young Consumers* 11, no. 1 (2010).

²⁹ Philip Kotler and Gary Armstrong, *Principles of Marketing* (2007).

cereals, soft drinks, savoury snacks, confectionary and fast foods.³⁰ These food products are otherwise known as HFSS-foods, which stands for High Fat-, Salt- and Sugar-foods.³¹ Here, the channels listed above will be illustrated:

Television:

Airing junk food advertising on television can have a persuasive impact on children's food-related attitudes and beliefs, especially when aired during children's programmes and primetime family TV. This is partly down to the fact that meanwhile over 50% of children have their own television set in their bedrooms.³² However, some regulations concerning TV-advertising to kids already exist. In the UK, companies are prohibited from advertising HFSS foods during programmes specifically aimed at children under 16 since 2006.³³

The Internet:

The internet has become a very attractive means of communication for marketers in recent years. This is due to the fact that it is low cost, has an interactive nature and is popular with young people and kids. Research has shown that around 90% of households have access to internet and use increases with kids' age.³⁴

Packaging at the POS:

Packaging has sometimes been called the "Silent Salesman".³⁵ This definitely applies to children, as they are able to process for instance a product on a mainly visual level and ignore most of what is said about the product.³⁶ They judge the product based on looking for a recognisable cartoon or attractive colours.³⁷ The food-industry has realised this by employing Psychologists. They attempt to produce "Eatertainment"- the combination of food and fun³⁸ and "Kids-Meals"- the combination of child sized portions with toys.³⁹

4.4.: The Proof is in the Sales Figures:

³⁰ Georgina Cairns et al., "Systematic reviews of the evidence on the nature, extent and effects of food marketing to children. A retrospective summary," *Appetite* 62 (2013).

³¹ Betty McBride, Charlie Powell, and Kawther Hashem, "the-21st-century-gingerbread-house," *British Heart Foundation* (2011).

³² Helen G. Dixon et al., "The effects of television advertisements for junk food versus nutritious food on children's food attitudes and preferences," *Social science & medicine* (1982) 65, no. 7 (2007).

³³ "WHO 2010,"

³⁴ Betty McBride, Charlie Powell, and Kawther Hashem, "the-21st-century-gingerbread-house," *British Heart Foundation* (2011).

³⁵ McNeal and Ji, "Silent Salesman," (2003).

³⁶ Ike-Elechi Ogbu and Rebecca Johnson, "How packaging affects the product preferences of children and the buyer behaviour of their parents in the food industry," *Young Consumers* 11, no. 1 (2010).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Roberts, "Eatertainment," (2005).

³⁹ Ike-Elechi Ogbu and Rebecca Johnson, "How packaging affects the product preferences of children and the buyer behaviour of their parents in the food industry," *Young Consumers* 11, no. 1 (2010).

The food industry can be satisfied with the work of its marketing specialists: The proof that this manipulative promotion and aggressive targeting of children has intended effect and influence is in the increasing sales figures. The explanation behind this seems to be correlations between children's or their parents' purchasing behaviour and even brand and category choice with tailored promotion.

Concerning purchasing preferences first of all, seven out of eight studies in the UK reported statistical

evidence that the nutritional quality of promoted foods correlated with the nutritional quality of product purchases of parents and the purchase requests by children.⁴⁰ In the case of junk food marketing, this nutritional quality would mean high calories and high levels of fat and sugar.

However not only the product choice is important to companies, but the frequency that their brand is chosen off the shelf. They want to know whether their efforts to increase children's brand loyalty have been effective. In total, fifteen studies contributed evidence to answer this question. A study by Robinson et al. (2007) demonstrated how branded packaging by fast food chain, MacDonald's influenced food preferences of pre-school children solely through strong branding for two contrasting products under the brand name: the traditional hamburger and foods, and carrots. effect. After assessment, there was clear that food promotion does in fact influence food choices at category and brand level.⁴¹

It does seem however as if their large budgets are paying off: Between 2010 and 2013, the number of kids' meals sold at fast-food restaurants increased by 54%, after advertising expenditures were considerably enlarged.⁴²

4.3.: Marketing Methods to get inside children's heads:

So now the question still remains, exactly how the food industry and their marketing experts have become so successful at getting children's heads time and time again. In this part of the paper, it will be studied where the links are made between repeated clever marketing and the resulting encouragement of unhealthy eating habits. Various studies and analysis of the content of the different marketing channels have shown that there is a collection of universal and recurring marketing techniques used by practically all players in the industry:

1.) Brand Licencing and Cartoon Characters:

⁴⁰ Georgina Cairns et al., "Systematic reviews of the evidence on the nature, extent and effects of food marketing to children. A retrospective summary," *Appetite* 62 (2013).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Liza Ramrayka, "Brands continue to target fast food marketing at kids," *The Guardian*

The use of spokes characters from current children's TV-programs has become a very popular strategy for instance in packaging and provides the possibility to link media programs and food manufacturers in the context of a supermarket-visit. This has proven to be very effective as young children can easily partner a spokes characters with the product.⁴³ Research also showed that an alternative, used by over half of the considered websites, was the brand creating its own charming cartoon character to represent them, following the themes of adventure, humour and fantasy.⁴⁴

2.) Contests, Games and Promotions:

Secondly, food advertisers are also creating competitions, games and app downloads to add the "fun-factor" to their websites to attract kids with give-aways.⁴⁵ Children can receive prizes for entering UPC codes or collect wrappers to get a free toy, often partnered with the release of a new film.⁴⁶ This is a way for manufacturers to gather children's personal details, e.g. Email or address to contact them repeatedly.⁴⁷

3.) Use of role models: celebrities, sportspeople and parents:

A further tactic of the junk food industry is featuring popular children's celebrities and sports heroes in their advertisements. This helps to build brand loyalty as kids trust their role models and consequently trust and stay loyal to the brands they promote.⁴⁸ A more devious approach is also indirectly targeting the parents. This consists of creating a desire of the product for parents: such as recipes, lunchbox ideas and prizes for the whole family.⁴⁹

4.) Links to Social Media:

An entire 75% of websites in the content analysis contained a link to a brand page on Social Media, such as Facebook and Twitter. This gives children the option to "Like" the page and allowing to be bombarded with promotions across their individual

⁴³ S. Linn and C. L. Novosat, "Calories for Sale: Food Marketing to Children in the Twenty-First Century," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 615, no. 1 (2008).

⁴⁴ Betty McBride, Charlie Powell, and Kawther Hashem, "the-21st-century-gingerbread-house," *British Heart Foundation* (2011).

⁴⁵ Georgina Cairns et al., "Systematic reviews of the evidence on the nature, extent and effects of food marketing to children. A retrospective summary," *Appetite* 62 (2013).

⁴⁶ S. Linn and C. L. Novosat, "Calories for Sale: Food Marketing to Children in the Twenty-First Century," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 615, no. 1 (2008).

⁴⁷ Betty McBride, Charlie Powell, and Kawther Hashem, "the-21st-century-gingerbread-house," *British Heart Foundation* (2011).

⁴⁸ Georgina Cairns et al., "Systematic reviews of the evidence on the nature, extent and effects of food marketing to children. A retrospective summary," *Appetite* 62 (2013).

⁴⁹ Betty McBride, Charlie Powell, and Kawther Hashem, "the-21st-century-gingerbread-house," *British Heart Foundation* (2011).

newsfeed. Furthermore, this tactic offers companies free “peer-to-peer-marketing”, as the users’ friends will be notified when they interact with the brand.⁵⁰

4.4. Some examples of Marketing affecting children’s eating habits:

In the following some concrete examples of different types of junk-food products working with a mixture of the marketing tactics especially tailored to children, as mentioned above, will be examined:

Sugary breakfast foods: “Krave” and “Poptarts” by Kellogg’s and “Sugarpuffs”:

Whereas Poptarts tend to go with images of the spokes characters with the release of popular children’s movies, such as “Shrek 3” as seen on 2007⁵¹, the cereals “Krave” and “Sugarpuffs” both aim to attract children to the product with the help of animated brand characters or mascots: The so called “Krave-Superhero” and the “Honeymonster”, which not only appear on packaging, but also host the websites. Speaking of websites, these are interactive and both contain quizzes, games and competitions such as “Find Honeymonster”. Furthermore, one can find buttons or links to the corresponding Facebook pages on Social Media in both cases.⁵²

Savoury snacks: “Cheesestrings”: character, rolemodels: The product designers of “Cheesestrings”, have developed a cheesy snack which can be moulded and torn apart, giving it the creative and “Eatertainment”⁵³ factor, which kids love. Whether it can be considered “healthy” however, as the manufacturer claims, is arguable by its HFSS characteristics. While they do use a brand character called “Mr. Strings”, who can also be seen in the UK TV-commercials, the website also takes advantage of children’s role models. It exhibits a Parents-Section, where lunchbox ideas and recipes by celebrity chefs are suggested.

Confectionary: “Cadbury’s Buttons”

Cadbury’s, now owned by Mondelez, is a very popular brand of chocolate in the UK and its product “Buttons” has been an iconic treat for children for years. They target this product very specifically and very successfully to kids. This has many reasons: The chocolate comes in little packets the form of bite sized buttons, usually with a picture of a character. On their website they even create fairy tales with these characters as interactive storybooks. They even

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ S. Linn and C. L. Novosat, “Calories for Sale: Food Marketing to Children in the Twenty-First Century,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 615, no. 1 (2008).

⁵² Betty McBride, Charlie Powell, and Kawther Hashem, “the-21st-century-gingerbread-house,” *British Heart Foundation* (2011).

⁵³ Roberts, “Eatertainment,” (2005).

go one step further by offering “Books for Grown-ups” and make the brand attractive and “friendly” towards parents.⁵⁴

5. Policies already in place to prevent negative effects:

TV-broadcast-advertising restrictions:

Advertising in the UK is controlled by the ASA, the Advertising Standards Authority, and the CAP, the Committee of Advertising Practise. They exist to protect the consumer and make sure companies abide to ethical and legal advertising. In order to protect children from exposure to junk food marketing during the broadcast of children’s TV programs, a “total ban on the advertising of high in fat, sugars and salt (HFSS) food during children’s television programmes on dedicated children’s broadcast channels and in programmes “of particular appeal” to children under the age of 16”⁵⁵ was passed in 2007 and 2008.

New non-broadcast media restrictions:

Just end of 2016, the CAP announced that there would also be restrictions placed on non-broadcast advertising media. This means other media, such as online, print and cinema, will be brought in line with the rules on TV advertising. From the 1st of July 2017, “adverts for products with high fat, salt or sugar content will no longer be allowed on video-sharing platforms and sponsored games if they are likely to appeal to children under the age of 16. Promotions, licensed characters and celebrities popular with children will be allowed for healthy food and drink products only.”⁵⁶ This is a very important step, because legislation needs to keep with the times that children and young people are slowly moving away from television, but are being almost constantly being exposed to the internet, particularly with Social Media.

Sugar tax levy:

Moving forward the UK-government, supported by Public Health England, plans to impose a tax on full sugar soft drinks, meaning a 20% mark-up of the price with the hope of discouraging purchase and slowly changing consumer behaviour in the long term.⁵⁷ The tax

⁵⁴ Betty McBride, Charlie Powell, and Kawther Hashem, “the-21st-century-gingerbread-house,” *British Heart Foundation* (2011).

⁵⁵ Department of Health, “Government Response to the House of Commons Health Select Committee report on Childhood obesity – brave and bold action, First Report of Session 2015-16,” (2016).

⁵⁶ Sarah Boseley, “Junk food ads targeting children banned in non-broadcast media,” *The Guardian*

⁵⁷ Department of Health, “Government Response to the House of Commons Health Select Committee report on Childhood obesity – brave and bold action, First Report of Session 2015-16,” (2016).

money earned with this levy will be invested in obesity prevention education such as sport programs to children.⁵⁸

6. Conclusion:

Taking all aspects of this controversial matter into consideration, one can say with certainty that yes, the aggressive junk food marketing to children is a trigger for the increasing childhood obesity in the UK and carries part of the blame. Proof of this is the deliberate manipulation of children's way of thinking and media preferences. Marketers influence their eating behaviour and create a desire and preference for unhealthy and fattening junk food through various tactics. To summarise, these tactics include: association with brand characters or celebrities, interactive games, social media links and parental credo. Although there are already restrictions in place in the UK and further measures planned to protect children and their health from advertising and there is future, many believe that it is not sufficient due to loopholes concerning broadcast rules and complete freedom concerning attractive packaging.

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⁵⁸ Tim Lobstein et al., "Child and adolescent obesity: Part of a bigger picture," *The Lancet* 385, no. 9986 (2015).

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Appendix:

